

## **Radical Village: A Self-Guided Walking Tour**

### **Grey Art Gallery, New York University**

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This tour is offered in conjunction with *The Left Front: Radical Art in the “Red Decade,” 1929–1940*, exhibition on view at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 100 Washington Square East, from January 13 to April 4, 2015.

Nearly 20 years before it became a center for Beat culture and folk music, New York City’s Village was an important place for radical politics, most notably Communism. In the decade that followed the Stock Market Crash of 1929, artists, writers, intellectuals, and radicals flooded the then-impooverished, unglamorous part of Manhattan mainly inhabited by immigrants, only to make it one of the most vibrant, energetic places in the nation. And in true New York spirit, those who came to the Village in search of Communism responded by making art of all kinds—from plays, to folk music, to poetry, to printmaking. This tour highlights the places where these Village radicals lived, as well as some of the places where they met regularly, in order to evoke their Communist spirit during the so-called “Red Decade,” from 1929 to 1940.

### **Part I: Greenwich Village**

Part I of this tour begins in front of the Washington Arch, where Fifth Ave. intersects Washington Square North. You can expect the tour to take about an hour and a half. Begin on the North side of the arch, facing South.

#### **1. Washington Square Park**

In 1917, several members of the Liberal Club did something unthinkable, even by today’s standards—they climbed to the top of the Washington Arch and declared Greenwich Village an “independent republic,” all the while shooting off cap guns. For them, Greenwich Village was home to anything “taboo in the Middle West,” and while they didn’t include Communism in their list of things that were permissible only in the West Village, they might as well have. From 1929 to 1940, Greenwich Village experienced the so-called “Red Decade,” when radical forms of Communism took hold. The area soon came alive with demonstrations, opposing Communist publications, folk-music concert halls, and experimental playhouses. The remainder of this tour focuses on the area surrounding the park and the radicals who forever changed the Greenwich Village’s cultural landscape.

**Exit the park south of the fountain at the intersection of Washington Square South and Sullivan Street. You will find what is now NYU’s Law School building at 42 Washington Square South.**

## **2. Home of John Reed, 42 Washington Square South**

Though his most famous work preceded the Red Decade by about 11 years, John Reed's influence on Greenwich Village's radical scene cannot be understated. Reed was editor of Communist magazine *The Masses* (located at 91 Greenwich Street), *The New Masses* in the '20s—a publication often reviled for its provocative, occasionally smutty content. In 1919, Reed observed the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia firsthand and wrote a series of articles later published in book form as *Ten Days That Shook the World*. The articles themselves were Village creations—he wrote them in the upstairs room of Polly's, a restaurant then located at 147 West 4th Street. Reed's first home was here on Washington Square South; he later lived at 1 Patchin Place. By the time of Reed's death in Russia in 1920, he had successfully founded the American Communist Party.

Continue walking south on Sullivan for two blocks, make a right on Bleecker Street and then a right on MacDougal Street. Walk north on MacDougal Street to reach the next destination on your left.

## **3. Minetta Tavern, 113 MacDougal Street**

Though it is commonly thought that artists always gathered in cafés and bars in the Village, that was not the case until the '30s. It was during this decade that Greenwich Village artists realized they needed to gather to discuss artistic and political ideas, and as a result, a few restaurants became meeting places for artists of all kinds. Minetta Tavern, which opened in 1937, is perhaps the most famous restaurant of this kind. It became a common meeting ground for radical poets like e.e. cummings, as well as less politically active, but no less important, writers and poets like Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, and Dylan Thomas.

Continue walking north on MacDougal Street, then cross West 3rd Street and walk a few steps for the next destination, also on your left.

## **4. Provincetown Playhouse, 133 MacDougal Street**

Founded in 1916 after moving from Provincetown, Massachusetts, the Provincetown Playhouse was known for staging experimental plays by radical playwrights—one of whom was John Reed himself. Reed's *Freedom* was a metaphoric play set in prison. Four archetypal characters struggle with the existential meanings of imprisonment, escape, and freedom. In a move that was edgy for its time, some of Provincetown's plays featured African American performers playing African American characters. The playhouse continued to stage radical works until 1929, when the effects of the Stock Market crash forced it to go out of business.

Continue walking north on MacDougal Street and cross West 4th Street to reach the Washington Place/MacDougal Street intersection. Now turn left to Washington Place and walk a few steps to 73 Washington Place.

### **5. Home of Delmore Schwartz, 73 Washington Place**

Modernist poet Delmore Schwartz wrote some of his finest poetry at 73 Washington Place, just above Berlotti's Italian Restaurant. After being raised on the Lower East Side by Jewish Romanian immigrants and then living on Greenwich Avenue, Schwartz attended Harvard, where he became friends with Leonard Bernstein and Robert Motherwell. Having become well-connected with these artist up-and-comers, Schwartz was poised for success, and he found it while living on Washington Place in a small apartment that could be reached only by a ladder. Here Schwartz wrote his pessimistic poetry, which reflected his alienation and failure to assimilate with fellow Americans.

Continue walking west on Washington Place and cross 6th Avenue to walk a few steps until you reach Sheridan Square.

### **6. Café Society, Sheridan Square (formerly 2 Sheridan Square)**

Café Society, ironically named for upper-class café society in Uptown Manhattan, was the first racially integrated nightclub in the United States. Opened by owner Barney Josephson in 1938, it was a center where disillusioned intellectuals could gather in a socially free atmosphere. Many WPA (Works Progress Administration) artists frequented Café Society, along with many black artists attracted by an entertainment policy so progressive that the young Carol Channing was asked to leave on account of the racial caricatures in her comedy routines. Perhaps the most notable event at this pro-racial integration, anti-Fascist club was Billie Holiday's first performance of "Strange Fruit," a ballad about lynchings in the American South.

Continue walking on Washington Place, then cross Grove Street, Christopher Street, and then West 10th Street. Continue walking on West 4th Street until you reach Charles Street. Turn left on Charles Street to reach the next destination.

### **7. Home of Woody Guthrie, 74 Charles Street**

Folk singer Woody Guthrie paid only \$27 per month to live in his fourth-floor walkup on Charles Street, a five-minute walk from Almanac House (see below). Guthrie was one of the most important Greenwich Village members of the Communist Party. Contrary to popular belief, Guthrie's music was often political—his famed song "This Land Is Your Land," for example, features an often-censored verse condemning private property.

Walk back to West 4th Street and turn left until you reach Perry Street. Then you turn right on Perry Street and walk a few steps to 38 Perry Street.

### **8. Home of James Agee, 38 Perry Street**

After moving from Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1932, writer and intellectual James Agee and his wife rented their first apartment in New York City at 38 Perry Street. Over the next decade, Agee

changed apartments—and wives—frequently, finally moving to Bleecker Street in 1941 with his third wife. At *Fortune* magazine, Agee wrote some of his most famous works, which were largely odes to capitalism. He might have preferred not to write them, but he would have otherwise not had any work at all. *Fortune* sent Agee and photographer Walker Evans to the Deep South in 1936 to observe the effects of the Great Depression firsthand, and it was then that Agee realized he could not write about his experience in a reader-friendly way anymore. Agee then worked on a prose poem for the next three years, only to have it rejected in 1939, the year John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* told the same story. Two years later, Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was finally released to harsh, negative reviews. It was not until the book's reprinting in 1960 that it achieved great renown.

Walk back to West 4th Street and turn left until you cross Charles Street. Then you continue on West 4th Street to reach the next destination.

### **9. Home of John Sloan, 240 West 4th Street**

In 1913, Aschan School co-founder John Sloan and his wife moved to West 4th Street in order to be closer to his studio, located at 35 6th Avenue. Sloan, like all members of the Ashcan School, was known for his naturalistic paintings of modern life that were, during the first decade of the 20th century, non-political—they had no social commentary. When Sloan became art editor of *The Masses* in December 1912, however, his work could no longer be evaluated without social issues in mind. Though Sloan worked for a Communist publication, he never allied himself with the Communist Party, instead calling himself a Socialist and openly praising the values of Soviet culture without ever actually embracing them. Furthermore, Sloan rejected modernism on the basis that its art did not have a message, in contrast with his hard-hitting political cartoons for *The Masses*. Sloan continued to work at the *The Masses* for only a little over three years until January 1916, setting an important precedent for many of the artists who produced Communist or Socialist art.

Continue walking on West 4th Street to reach West 10th Street and turn left to walk until you cross Waverly Place. Then continue walking for a few steps to reach the next destination.

### **10. Almanac House, 130 West 10th Street**

The so-called “Almanac House” served as the center of a Popular Front folk-music movement in Greenwich Village during the 1930s. This house, which, at the time, was next door to the Women's House of Detention, charged 35 cents admission to hear some of the best folk music of the time. Among the performers at Almanac House were Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, and Alan Lomax. Almanac House helped spark an interest in folk music that persisted in the West Village through the '50s and '60s, when musicians like Bob Dylan became famous for their poetic, sad lyrics.

Continue walking on West 10th Street and cross Greenwich Ave. The Patchin Place is a gated cul-de-sac located on West 10th Street and is opposite to Jefferson Market Garden.

### **11. Home of e.e. cummings, 4 Patchin Place**

Poet e.e. cummings became a model Village artist for his bohemian ways and aggressively radical writing style. Cummings lived on Patchin Place, an alley that was seen as embodying Village attitudes for its seclusion. (Just a few years before cummings moved to Patchin Place, John Reed lived at 1 Patchin Place.) Known for his entirely lower-case poetic language, cummings was among the most vocal radicals living in the Village at the time. He actively hated the New Deal and trade unions, and he believed that anything above 14th Street did not have an individualist spirit.

Continue walking on West 10th Street until you reach the West 10th/6th Avenue intersection. Then turn right at 6th Avenue to walk a few steps towards the destination—now a gourmet market Citarella.

### **12. Former location of the *Partisan Review*, 430 6th Avenue**

Founded in 1934 by William Phillips, the *Partisan Review* was a radical Communist and Marxist journal that constantly found itself in competition with Reed's *New Masses*. Unlike *The New Masses*, however, the *Partisan Review* had the distinction of publishing literary criticism in addition to its staunchly Communist content. Phillips' idea was to get radical, critical writers like Philip Rahv, arguably the journal's most important writer, to be on the masthead in order to cause intellectual ferment.

Walk back to the West 10th/6th Avenue intersection and continue walking to West 12th Street. When you reach the West 12th/6th Avenue intersection, turn right and walk to the New School.

### **13. The New School, 66 West 12th Street**

With Nazism and Fascism on the rise in Europe, the West Village experienced an influx of European intellectuals who were fleeing various political regimes at the end of the 1930s. Many of these intellectuals taught at the New School, affectionately called the "University of Exile." Among those who came from Europe to teach at the New School were political theorist Hannah Arendt, anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, and economist Karl Brandt. Ultimately, the University of Exile stimulated the Village art scene, paving the way for the Abstract Expressionists to find mass success nearly a decade later.

Turn around on West 12th Street and turn right at 6th Avenue. You need to walk two blocks to reach the West 14th/6th Avenue intersection. Then turn right to walk to the next destination.

#### **14. Studio and Home of Isabel Bishop, 9 West 14th Street**

Artist Isabel Bishop relocated her studio from Perry Street to Union Square just several years before radical politics took a foothold in the Village. Known for her drawings of people in Union Square inspired by Renaissance painting, Bishop became one of the most important women artists of the 20th century and went on to depict New Yorkers as they existed during this time of revolution. Although Bishop may not have been as closely tied to Communism as other thinkers and artists on this tour may be, her work acts as important sources of information about the way people in the Village interacted at this time.

Continue walking in the same direction on West 14h Street and you will arrive at Union Square.

#### **15. Site of 1930 Communist Party demonstration, Union Square**

For over a century, Union Square has been a gathering ground for radical political movements. Just two years ago, in 2012, thousands flocked to Union Square for an Occupy Wall Street-related May Day demonstration. This is incomparable to what happened in 1930, when the Communist Party held a demonstration. Though Communist Party leader William Z. Foster was given orders to call off the demonstration, it was held anyway. The demonstration called for more like it across the nation, and 35,000 people came. Of that 35,000, 7,000 marched to City Hall, with several Communist leaders jailed along the way for inciting a riot. The 300 New York police officers at the demonstration beat Communist Party members who wanted to walk to City Hall as well.

Continue walking on West 14h Street and you will reach your next destination.

#### **16. Location of first John Reed Club meeting, 102 East 14th Street**

Formed in the name of the founder of *The New Masses*, the John Reed Club was devoted to spreading Communist ideas throughout America. The club held meetings in which panel members spoke against capitalism with an almost sermon-like zeal. Art was also of high importance to the John Reed Club. In a 1932 issue of *The New Masses*, a manifesto was published that closed with a paragraph how art inherently had a social purpose, how art could not only exist for art's sake. Among the John Reed Club's most important members were famed social art historian Meyer Schapiro and Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco.

### **Part II: Selected East Village Locations**

For those feeling particularly radical, here are three more East Village locations to visit. Note: These locations are farther apart than those on the Greenwich Village walking tour. As such, this part of the tour requires more walking.

### **17. Home of Max Eastman, 12 East 8th Street**

Writer Max Eastman lived in the “narrowest house in the Village” in a room of his friend Eugen Bossevain’s apartment. Shortly after World War I, Eastman became involved with John Reed’s publication *The Masses*—his writing was so provocative that he was tried twice under the Sedition Act, a legislation that made anti-governmental writing punishable by law. Eastman continued to be involved with Communism through the 1930s. During the ‘30s, Eastman shifted his attention to literary criticism, focusing on the “Cult of Unintelligibility,” a group of modernist writers that included James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and e.e. cummings. Eastman claimed that these works authors wrote with a style that was too formal, and, like John Reed Club member Meyer Schapiro, Eastman believed that these authors needed to add a social element to their work. Eastman also lived at 118 Waverly Place sometimes.

Exit the Grey Art Gallery and turn right to East 8th Street. Walk East on East 8th Street and you will cross 3rd Avenue, 2nd Avenue, and 1st Avenue until you reach Avenue A. Then turn right to walk towards East 6th Street and you will find your next destination on your way. It will take you nearly 20 minutes to walk.

### **18. Home of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, 103 Avenue A**

When Julius and Ethel Rosenberg moved to Avenue A in the ‘40s (years after the Red Decade ended), nobody suspected anything of the Jewish American couple. A decade later, however, the couple seemed a lot more menacing. In 1951, the Rosenbergs were given the death penalty after they were found guilty of stealing American secrets about the atomic bomb for Soviet Russia. Two years later, both were executed by electric chair. The execution of the Rosenbergs came at a time when Americans were growing increasingly suspicious, and even afraid, of Communism, as opposed to the Red Decade, when radicals embraced Communism and were not as harshly treated for it. The Rosenbergs’ crimes initiated a decade in which Americans were devoted to weeding out Communism and blacklisting those who were suspected of Soviet loyalties.

Continue walking south on Avenue A until you reach East 3rd Street. Turn right to walk one block to 1st Avenue and then turn left to walk south to East 1st Street. At the East 1st Street/1st Avenue intersection, turn right to walk a few steps to our last stop.

### **19. Offices of *The Catholic Worker*, 36 East 1st Street**

To combat the radical Communism of Greenwich Village during the ‘30s, Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin founded *The Catholic Worker* in 1933. The one-cent newspaper discussed issues that affected politically-minded, religious workers, such as striking, wages, and communes. By 1936, the circulation was up to 150,000. Today, the newspaper is still published 12 times a year.

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